

STORIES OF DREAMS: DOCUMENTED AND UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS' TRAUMAS AND RESILIENCE IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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Abstract - Schools with immigrant populations—both documented and undocumented—must find ways to support their students' success in the face of many possible psychological factors influencing their progress, including trauma and resilience. We asked whether there are causes and manifestations of trauma and resilience for immigrant students that can be identified through narratives and whether educators can develop supports for immigrants using research on trauma and resilience. We also looked at differences in the ways trauma and resilience were portrayed for documented and undocumented students in U.S. schools in order to guide development of school supports. We analyzed 38 stories of immigrant students (of equal gender) in New York City (Grades 8–12), 10 of which were undocumented student stories. Through coding and comparisons of themes we found that the majority of documented students experienced such trauma-related stressors as racism, xenophobia, loss of family, and language/social isolation while also describing resiliency-related factors, including peer interactions and family supports. The undocumented student stories involved themes of separation and loss as well as fears of punishment, but with considerably more resiliency-related factors, including family supports, decision-making and self-determination. The number of stressors and factors in the students' stories reflects the varied and complex nature of students' experiences in schools, suggesting that school responses to students must be equally varied, emphasizing the unique assets and needs of each. We address the findings and offer implications for school policy and practices.

Keywords - Immigrant students, Resilience, Stories, Trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

In the United States there has been an increasing interest in the impact of immigrant status on youth in schools—particularly given a political atmosphere challenging the image of a country with “open doors” and opportunity for all. Currently, between 20 and 25 percent of children and adolescents under the age of 18 in the United States are growing up in immigrant families—even though they may have been born here [1]—and almost two-thirds of this group are from Latin countries [2]. More research has been gathered on first- or second-generation immigrants [3, 4] and on the “1.5 generation”: those who come to the U.S. as children or adolescents and are culturally split between two worlds [5]. The differences in measures of school achievement between and within these groups has been an important element in the research. An important finding is that immigrants, for example, may first enter school optimistic to learn but have difficulty adjusting and become more vulnerable with time. The longer this immigrant population is enrolled in U.S. public schools, the greater the decline in their academic aspirations and achievement [e.g. 6,7]. We found that the experiences of trauma of immigrant students can contribute to this decline, which has a variety of sources, as can the ways that these students cope and demonstrate resilience [8].

Over the past decade, there has been a growing awareness of the potentially psychological toll taken on those immigrants who were brought to this country as younger children without legal protections [9,10]. As a relatively small subset of immigrant

youth in the U.S. (estimated to be 2.1 million), they have been allowed to attend school but have no additional rights. Many have crossed international borders unaccompanied. In 2016, more than 15% of all apprehended individuals attempting to come into the U.S. were unaccompanied children from Central America [11]. These immigrant students are now threatened by deportation more than in the past with the possible repeal of the “Dream Act” in the U.S., which is currently being debated by legislators in Washington, D.C. There appears to be increasing empirical evidence that these undocumented youth who are part of the 1.5 generation have experiences that set them apart from those who migrate as adults [12], as they have spent their formative years in the U.S., and from their immigrant peers, who are not excluded from working, applying to college or undertaking other important passages into adulthood. Their mental and emotional well-being have been a recent source of interest; as Gonzales and his colleagues point out, not until four years ago did studies seek to examine their unique experiences [13].

The researchers' study drew from populations of college-aged undocumented immigrants, while we sought to investigate the psychological well-being of those in high school. Doing so might allow us to provide more targeted support to schools that are attempting to educate undocumented students. We are concerned that efforts and resources to help diverse students often result in issues of equity and unintended segregation of those receiving supports. Reference [14] outlines the understanding and support of immigrant students, for example, in their

placement into a second-language program, limiting the understanding of how race, gender and poverty might affect students' learning [15]. Historically, public-school systems in the United States have tended to equate educational programming for immigrant students to language instruction. And with fewer than 12% of English learners in the United States receiving instruction in the language they know best [16], there has been an important and long debate about whether public funding should support education for immigrants in their first language at all. In a more general sense, this inability to see the "whole student" reflects the gap between what [17] called the "demographic imperative" of population shifts and the "demographic divide" within schools and districts, reflecting historical disparities [18]. In the work that we do with children and adolescents in high-needs schools [19, 20], immigrant status is primarily connected with categories that result in "othering": language, religion, economic status and/or race.

What we are describing here appears to be of international proportions. The impact of massive immigration in other parts of the world, combined with individual countries' historically xenophobic and racist beliefs, have created schools that are struggling to remedy the inequities of the past and the present. This is particularly true of undocumented immigrant students in other parts of the world [21, 22, 23]. Much of that literature ties emotional problems of immigrant students to the behavior and attitudes of others in response to their immigrant status. Because of the current political climate and changes in policies toward undocumented immigrant students, there is an even greater urgency for educators to find ways to make public schooling more culturally responsive. Using the perspectives offered by research on students' experience of trauma and resiliency in particular, we hope to add to the literature on how public schools and communities can better support these students.

We used an approach to looking at trauma and resiliencies of undocumented students that we had brought to bear on our understanding of the experience of immigrants in school settings drawn from literary studies in our earlier work [24]. Building on the metaphor of the "speaking wound" [25], references [26] consider that students carry wounds from life experiences into a school that both "connect closely to one's own and provide a context for considering and analyzing inequities in how people are positioned". They go further, arguing that these students are exposed to the ... "racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic discourses..." in public schools which constitutes—creates—further trauma, reflecting the positions of scholars of "race and postcolonialism across disciplines around the traumatic individual, institutional, and systemic

consequences of racism." [27]. We intend to explore whether "speaking the wounds" that immigrant students have experienced before and during their school experience might strengthen their resiliency in the face of future stressors.

Assuming that the potential for additional trauma and traumatic stressors to students can occur within a school environment—whether through isolation, bullying, harassment or observing violence—educators have sought remedies to intervene or prevent further damage. Understanding "resilience" as a way to cope with trauma has been, for several decades, an important strategy researched in the literature across the disciplines [28, 29, 30].

A central question that has been asked over the past several years is, What factors might be associated with resilience during and after trauma occurs? The related question asked in the research is, What factors (personal, social, support resources) might protect against the onset or later trauma [31]? In many of the studies on immigrant, refugee or newcomer students, resilience is treated as one of several mediating variables rather than as a key construct to understand from a perspective of diversity.

One of the few studies that we could find in recent literature on resilience and immigrant students was conducted by [32]. The researchers undertook a comparative study of Chinese and American middle school students' perceptions of resilience. They found that there are common resilience factors for both populations: social supports with peers, teachers and parents; individual characteristics such as self-control, self-determination or goal determination. These could be enhanced to promote resiliency in all children, but the expression and interpretation of these factors—as well as the mechanisms for enhancing them—would depend on the culture. For example, academic self-efficacy was not as important for Chinese students as for American students; strong family relationships and Taoist and Confucianist approaches to adversity could improve resilience among the Chinese students.

The distinction between the universal themes of both trauma and resilience as well as the factors contributing to both versus the ways in which cultural expression and interpretation of them may vary greatly for students from diverse backgrounds is one we wish to highlight in our work here. Using the language of the students to better understand their experience and to infer what may be a function of their status as "diverse" is of particular interest, following the point made by [33].

We feel that there are grounds to view these narratives as both windows into the students' experiences and forms of action to guide efforts by the school communities to support their potential and

growth. Student engagement in the process of expression and interpretation of their experience is what [34] termed a “social act in the world in relation to one another” constituting the world and themselves. However, as suggested by some researchers, telling personal stories in school situations may be culture-bound and unable to be systematically applied to all cultural contexts [35]. We want to be mindful of variations in the stories that we are honored to share here.

The present study, then, builds on what is known about the experience of immigrant students in schools in the U.S., using the perspectives of trauma and resilience theories in an effort to inform educators about ways in which schools and schooling can become more supportive of the diverse populations they serve. We believe that the tremendous variation in how trauma and resilience are understood—as well as how to understand diversity itself—suggested a more exploratory approach to our work. While many studies have sought to develop factors to protect or prevent further trauma and/or strengthen factors contributing to resilience, relatively few have relied on stories written by immigrant students as a primary research source. We decided to use the storytelling format rather than interviews as we felt there was a greater opportunity for the students to express themselves with an audience of peers—and in their own languages. Finally, we hoped to compare our findings to those of colleagues in other parts of the world, given the expanding number of migrating people and the challenges that schools face on a global scale to educate them.

Schools with immigrant populations must find ways to support their students’ success when there may be many culturally and psychologically diverse factors influencing their progress, including trauma and resilience. Given our experience and the related literature, we began with two main research questions: 1) Are there causes and manifestations of trauma and resilience for immigrant students that can be identified through narratives; and 2) Can educators develop supports for immigrants using research on trauma and resilience? Given this, we are assuming that psychological effects of trauma and resilience for immigrant students (both prior to and current in origin) need exploration. By reviewing international studies on immigrant students’ school adjustment (as well as in-depth analyses of narratives of immigrant students in U.S. schools), more comprehensive school supports can be developed.

II. DETAILS EXPERIMENTAL

As in a previous study [36], we adhere to a more exploratory approach, allowing for the voices of those with experience to emerge without making assumptions and essentializing the categorization of

those experiences. Our data source from the previous study was 28 immigrant students in the New York City area (Grades 8–12), representing 10 Latin/Caribbean, Asian, African, Middle Eastern and European countries; all were enrolled in public schools in the area and all had arrived in the United States between June and December 2015. In the current study, 10 immigrant undocumented students in the same schools, also Grades 8–12, from 4 Latin/Caribbean and African countries were included, all of whom arrived between 2012 and 2013. The similarity in time frame in their arrival in New York was done to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that the historical moment in which the students came to this country was largely the same. With both groups, the stories were written in Fall 2016 with the students participating on a voluntary basis in an after-school program that was intending to help them with their language and writing skills. The other limitation in the number within the student group in our study has to do with the structure of narratives they produced, described below.

The stories were from students’ writing about their school experiences, using a philosophy/pedagogy developed through Herstory, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization. According to Herstory, students would write and share their personal stories, thereby facilitating the individual’s growth/purpose and strengthening ties to others, forming a community. The guided memoir-writing workshops ask the writer to attempt to place the listener in her/his shoes, creating reader empathy: “What is the most important experience you have had that you feel would help those in your school understand what it’s been like for you?” What has emerged over the years are first-person anonymous narratives telling stories of trauma and resilience. Bilingual facilitators have been trained to facilitate the process, as well as leaders of high school and college programs, student interns and academics. Herstory has become involved in programming offered in schools, in prisons, and in the community. The mission is to create a body of living literature that is meant to be shared, creating empathy, change and compassion—the role of literature everywhere. The students’ stories were written in the language of their choosing and archived as part of the Herstory website. As an inferential process to create understanding, grounded theory guided our analyses [37]. The theory fits nicely within our research structure as we reviewed documents, information about the schools the students attend, and their backgrounds, all of which will be utilized to support the research. In grounded theory the first step for data analysis is to establish a method of coding the information to label important words, groups of words, or passages. Verbatim quotes will be utilized to capture the essence of the writer’s story. The stories were read and analyzed by us for themes without any knowledge of the writers

involved. The study described here primarily addresses the themes drawn from the stories, both inductively and in “mapping” the themes onto the factors identified in the extant literature on trauma and resiliency. Our review of the literature suggested to us a way to organize the factors into three somewhat

crudely delineated areas: factors that are external to the student related to trauma or resiliency; psychological factors related to trauma; and psychological factors that are part of the student related to resiliency. Table 1 offers the factors that were used in the analyses of the stories.

Category	External Factors	Psychological Factors of Trauma	Psychological Factors of Resilience
Factors	Economic, political and social adversity Crossing borders Friendship patterns Exclusion/inclusion Xenophobia Racism Language support Social equality/ Inequality Parent-child relations Parental involvement Strong family relationships	Vividness of memories Avoidance of stimuli Grief Anxiety Guilt Memory problems Hyperarousal Difficulties with emotional stability Physical symptoms Attention Impulse control Dissociation Interpersonal relationships Self-attributions	Optimism Intrinsic motivation Assertiveness Problem-solving ability Social support Good cognitive skills Effective decision-making Self-control Self-determination/ Goal determination Academic self-efficacy Religious beliefs about adversity Connectedness to home culture

Table 1. Factors Used In Analyses of Immigrant Students’ Stories

Each story was read and “coded” for its main themes by each of us separately, and we then compared coding, identifying and reaching agreement on the themes per story. The elements that were identified for each were then tallied for the 38 stories (total) and compared to the factors that we describe here to understand more fully how the students’ experiences might guide educators to develop a stronger and safer educational environment.

III. RESULTS

After tallying the frequencies of the story themes, we looked at the most frequent across the 38 stories, and saw that there were clear differences in the themes between the documented and undocumented immigrant student stories. Table 2 provides the key themes and frequencies for the stories.

STUDENT GROUP	DOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT STUDENTS		UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT STUDENTS	
	THEME	FREQUENCY	THEME	FREQUENCY
	Racism/ Xenophobia	25/28	Separation/ Loss	9/10
	Family Members	21/28	Fear of Punishment	7/10
	Socialization with Peers	19/28	Family Supports	7/10
	Linguistic/ Social Isolation	17/28	Decision-Making	7/10
			Self-Determination	6/10

Table 2. Identified Themes And Frequencies in Immigrant Student Stories (Documented And Undocumented)

The most frequent theme for the documented immigrant students (in 25 of 28 stories) was racism and xenophobia, reflected in bullying comments about the student’s appearance and dress; threats of violence; exclusion based on race; or observation of these incidents. In four of the stories, the person making the comments was a teacher and involved a form of symbolic racism. It should be noted here that

these stories included multiple examples of xenophobia and racism within a narrative, not just a single incident. Almost all the stories that included episodes of racism and xenophobia resulted in the students describing efforts to cope and evade bullies through such behavior as school avoidance or dissociating from the situation. The second most frequent theme in the stories of documented

immigrants involved family members—both the separation/loss of them and the relationship with them helping to support the students through a crisis. This was apparent in 21 of the 28 stories. It is notable here that relatively few (5 of the 21 stories) dealt with parents, but instead addressed siblings and extended family members. The third most frequent theme in the documented students' stories involved the seeking out or experience of social relationships with peers to "normalize" the students' experience. This occurred in 19 of the 28 stories we read. We also noted a theme of isolation (both linguistic and social) in 17 of the 28 stories written by the documented students.

Undocumented student stories were dominated by the theme of separation and a sense of loss from family members (most typically of a mother or father) in 9 of the 10 narratives we read. The theme was marked in that the migration to the U.S. included leaving family members who expressed a desire to keep their daughter or son there instead. In 7 of the 10 stories by undocumented students, there were themes of punishment and related fears about this. What is important to note is that it was often a fear of punishments unrelated to legal status, such as a fear associated with authority figures in the school setting. The family supports that were prominent in 7 of the 10 stories were both of family members who migrated to the U.S. and those who did not, but all involved a sense of love and/or belonging. Equally prominent in the undocumented students' stories (7 of 10) were themes of decision-making, particularly about the decision to migrate to the U.S. The narratives reflected a sense that the students actively elected to migrate to the U.S. (even as younger children) rather than being forced to do so by their families. Finally, there is a frequent theme (6 out of 10 stories) of self-determination in the undocumented students' writing, as demonstrated by terms that reflected strength and commitment to survival in the face of adversity.

Two other aspects of the analyses of documented student narratives are significant and somewhat related. First, the majority of other themes noted in the stories (adversity experienced during immigration, social inequality, parent-child relations, the connections to home culture, the perceived school abilities, the relationships with adults in the school, the guilt over behavior, fear of others, the confusion over identity, the privilege/ economic advantages of others and the initiative to help other people) were noted in only one or two of the stories. Second, no story pointed to a single event or theme as being the most important, but instead had multiple themes that suggested to us that one's experiences that are important to communicate through stories are multidimensional and complex. This is important as a contrast to the undocumented student narratives, where the other themes were fewer (including harsh

stepparents, illness of family members, xenophobia and peer relationships) and 3 of the stories having a single theme that was portrayed in a number of ways. In comparison to those of documented students, the undocumented student narratives were more similar and involved trauma and resiliency themes that were singular across the narrative.

While the documented student narratives appear to reflect other literature about racism and xenophobia in terms of bullying, exclusion and symbolic racism [38, 39, 40, 41], the undocumented students focused more on the experience of leaving—and losing—loved ones [42]. The reminder to the educational community about the racial aspect of immigration is unmistakable, but it is also important to note that the experience associated with one's legal status may supersede such biases. Safety and security may involve both issues of "othering" and protection in schools. The importance of families—not simply parents—was made apparent in this research for both documented and undocumented immigrant students, and our results echo the work of [43, 44, and 45] in pointing to the importance of families in explaining the stress and efforts to cope that they experience. References [46] have reviewed significant research suggesting that separation from extended families can be a major source of stress and trauma for immigrating students. In the case of undocumented students, it may be that the feelings of choosing to leave are prominent in the sense of loss.

The importance of peer relationships in strengthening resiliency against trauma is an important finding with documented students, and the absence of this with undocumented students is equally important. We believe that the "normalizing" of school experience may speak to the acculturation process that is discussed at length in the research about immigrant students and families, and what is often addressed in educational resources as an important component of responding to this population. However, it may be that the undocumented students experience less of this benefit, having learned to rely on themselves more, as evidenced by the themes of decision-making and self-determination in the narratives.

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